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RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L PARIS 000986

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/21/2015

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SUBJECT: COMOROS PRESIDENT UNDERSCORES U.S. FRIENDSHIP

Classified By: Ambassador Craig R. Stapleton. Reasons 1.4b,d

11. (C) Summary: Comoros President Assoumani Azali underscored to the Ambassador his cooperative relationship with the USG, including signature of an Article 98 agreement and counter-terrorism efforts. He regretted the absence of an accredited American ambassador to the Comoros. Azali related he had met with the French presidency to discuss a forthcoming IMF performance evaluation and to highlight mitigating economic factors for consideration. He noted his achievements in promoting local education as a means to counter the potential exposure of Comoros youth to radical Islamic tendencies through schooling overseas. Azali confirmed plans for democratic elections in the Comoros and that he would step down from the presidency. Separately, the French MFA confided to the embassy that France is encouraging Azali to take a position at the African Union or the Organisation Mondiale pour la Francophonie, but that he appears bent on remaining in local Comoros politics. End Summary

12. (C) Comoros President Assoumani Azali called on the Ambassador on February 1, stressing his record of close collaboration with the USG. He volunteered off the mark that he had signed an Article 98 agreement for the Comoros and he emphasized counter-terrorism cooperation, including continuing efforts to apprehend Harun Fazul for his role in the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa. Azali regretted the continuing absence of an accredited American ambassador to the Comoros, commented he was aware that the U.S. would now shift its accreditation from Embassy Port Louis to Embassy Antananarivo and noted that the U.S. formerly had an official diplomatic presence in Moroni proper. He lauded the contributions of former U.S. Ambassador to the Comoros John Price in advancing Comoros-U.S. relations, describing the envoy as "like a brother."

13. (C) Azali said he would step down from the presidency and that elections would go forward in the spring as mandated by the Comoros constitution. He shed no light on his personal plans for post-presidential life, stating he must remain focused completely on the needs of his administration. (Note: French MFA DAS-Equivalent Remi Marechaux informed Africa Watcher that France is encouraging Azali to take a position with the African Union or the Organisation Mondiale pour la Francophonie, a worldwide structure to promote Francophone culture. Azali however appears bent on the governance of the island of Grande Comore, Marechaux said.)

14. (C) Although the Comoros had emerged as a stable if young democracy after nearly three decades of continuous turbulence, Azali stressed its economic fragility and the need to generate opportunities for a youthful population, where two thirds of Comoros citizens were under 30 years of

age. He said he was the architect of important educational reforms, including the establishment of a university, which he termed vital to the security of the Comoros. Homegrown schooling was critically important, Azali advised, for otherwise Comoros youth would flock to schools in Khartoum and in Arab states, where they risked being radicalized by extremist ideas.

15. (C) Azali related he had just met with Michel de Bonnecorse, the Africa Counselor to President Chirac, in order to discuss IMF and World Bank programs in the Comoros. The IMF would shortly issue a performance evaluation and Azali wanted to highlight mitigating economic factors that he hoped might offset an otherwise sub-par assessment. State income fell, Azali claimed, due to market fluctuation in the value of vanilla, which he said comprises 40 percent of Comoros GDP, because budget projections for the Comoros had assumed petrol prices at 30 USD per barrel, and on account of a decline in shipping revenues.

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Stapleton